

“Public Employment, Work Processes, and Capital Reproduction: Social Work in Times of Job Precariousness” by Fiorella Cademartori. Tandil: PUKA Editora, 2022, 186 pages. ISBN 978-987-88-3567-9.

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The critical-descriptive reflection on the State and its determinations is often a less explored dimension in the field of Social Work. Even less common is the evaluation of the conditions that make the State a commissioner of welfare for the society it governs, especially if approached from the perspective of workers employed by this State to address policies for subaltern sectors, the users of these policies. The book “Public Employment, Work Processes, and Capital Reproduction: Social Work in Times of Job Precariousness”¹, does not shy away from this reflection but makes it the central focus of its exposition.

The book is authored by Fiorella Cademartori, a Social Work graduate from the National University of Tucumán, Master in Social Work from the National University of La Plata, and Ph.D. in Social Sciences from the University of Buenos Aires². The Tucumán-based academic studies the job precariousness to which the State subjects Social Workers (SWs)³, highlighting the disciplinary mechanisms that frame the work processes of these wage earners, using the recent history of SWs in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, as a case study. Crossing studies specific to Social Work with labor studies, labor sociology, and political theory (framed in a critical perspective), Cademartori aims to show in detail how job precariousness affects the final outcome projected by SWs in their professional practices. The book also reveals what happens in the work environment, affecting both the workers and the users of social services.

The text is presented as a reordering and restructuring of Cademartori’s doctoral thesis. This resulted in a text specially designed for internal debate within the Social Work community. In order to address its objectives, the book is structured with an introduction, five chapters, partial conclusions in each, and final and open conclusions – as the author names them.

¹ It is worth noting that the text is freely available for download on the editorial’s website (www.pukaeditora.com.ar). This ensures its open access and circulation. We appreciate the authors and Editorial Navegando for granting permission to translate and republish this article.

² The author is currently a teaching researcher at the National Universities of Tucumán (FFyL - UNT) and Santiago del Estero (FHCSyS - UNSE).

³ The author clarifies that she chose to reference social work professionals using the feminine gender since the composition of this collective is predominantly made up of women and feminized bodies (p.15)



The introduction is dedicated to positioning her study temporally and geographically. Cademartori explains how the neoliberal actions and policies initiated by the last civic-military dictatorship in Argentina, from 1976, along with the complex of state counter-reforms in the period from 1989 to 1999, gave rise to the matrix of job precariousness that afflicts contemporary labor relations. This situation is specifically studied in Social Work in the province of Buenos Aires, starting from the reforms of the 1990s, reaching the effects unleashed in the two subsequent decades.

Throughout the five chapters, Cademartori attempts to account for the characteristics assumed by the forms of buying and selling the labor force of Social Work after the labor counter-reforms of the State; how these conditions of precariousness affect the work processes of the agents; and what relationship exists between the State, social policies, SWs, and the interventions carried out.

Chapter 1 (“The Debate on Working Conditions and Its Expression in the Field of Social Work in Argentina”) is dedicated, firstly, to defining the category of “working conditions” to take it as the axis of study for the case. Throughout an extensive theoretical review, Cademartori opts to conceive this concept in a dynamic and historicized way, framing it in capitalist determinations and mediations.

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The author expresses that working conditions encompass not only a worker’s ability to sustain the sale of their labor power over time but also the form and means in which this sustainability occurs. In this sense, the reproduction to continue selling labor power refers to wages, and work as an enactment – a potential possibility for transformation – refers to the means for making the potential concrete (instruments, tools, physical space), as well as the organization, disposition, and management of the mentioned labor power by the buyer. Therefore, working conditions are not just external constraints but end up organizing work practices and limiting the boundaries of activities carried out by workers.

In the second part, Cademartori reviews and compiles the production of studies on the condition of Social Workers conducted by the professionals themselves. The author distinguishes two periods: one episodic, focusing on the issue from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, and the second, showing the deployment and installation of the issue of job precariousness in the professional agenda from the mid-2000s. Through the selected studies, there is an understanding of a labor market where the main employer is the State; various forms of employment have been created beyond the classic employment



contract; there are many professionals with salaries that do not cover the amounts of the Basic Total Basket (CBT); a partial disappearance of professional associations and unions in the fight for lost rights; and constant rotation in multiple jobs in the face of precariousness.

Chapter 2 (“Limitations and Potentialities of the Professional Exercise of Social Workers: Analysis under the Category of Work Processes”) starts with the definition of the State and the categories “work” and “work processes” from a Marxist perspective. With this theoretical framework in mind, it explains the historical materiality that the State acquires through practices carried out by specialized institutions operating concretely in capitalism. With this on the table, it explains the peculiarities of SWs as public sector workers who, by selling their labor power to the State, do not directly participate in the process of valorization of produced capital. The debate on productive/unproductive work becomes an explanatory key here, with a crucial dialogue with Marilda V. Iamamoto’s work, providing valuable insights into debates seldom studied in professional training.

Chapter 3 (“Contemporary Seal in Labor Relations: Capital Offensive, State Mediation, and Working Class Reproduction”) focuses on the role of the State as a reshaper of the labor market with the deployment of neoliberal policies, especially at its peak in the 1990s. It discusses whether in the subsequent decades there were processes of rupture, continuity, evolution, stagnation, or regression in labor dynamics.

Through an analysis of quantitative data, Cademartori demonstrates that by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, even with the recomposition of the labor market after the most critical indicators in terms of poverty and unemployment in the country (2001–2002), labor guarantees were scarcely rebuilt a decade later. This was due to the abuse of the use of fixed-term contracts or other contractual modalities with predetermined deadlines. Although from 2001 to 2011, the number of state employees of the National Executive increased, it was done without guaranteeing stability and accessibility conditions for historical labor rights (such as seniority, various leave, retirement, paid vacations, among others). This is evident in the following quote: “(...) a decade ago, the ratio was 1 hired worker for every 60 permanent workers; in 2011, the equation is 1 hired worker for every 6 permanent workers” (p.90).



Chapter 4 (“Characteristics of the Working Conditions of Social Workers in the Province of Buenos Aires: The ‘Picture’ To Be Explained”) goes directly into the empirical analysis of the case⁴. The first massive survey on the theme of working conditions carried out in 2011 by the Professional College of Social Workers of the province of Buenos Aires (CATSPBA) is used as the central working document. The analyzed data include the relationship of buying-selling labor power, the particularities of this relationship, and the enactment of labor power.

Cademartori effectively manages to expose the deep state of precariousness in the working conditions of SWs. The trend towards fixed-term contracts, low wages, physical conditions of work environments, lack of resources and tools, constant rotation of workers in search of more favorable scenarios, pluriemployment as a strategy against insufficient salaries, among other situations, creates a group of workers in constant relations of vulnerability to the State.

Chapter 5 (“Scope and Impacts of Job Precariousness: The Work Processes of Social Workers in Dispute”) analyzes the visibly precarious working conditions of SWs practicing in the province of Buenos Aires. It highlights the discipline to which both SWs and users are subjected, shaping the work processes of professionals. It describes the degradation of the potentialities of SWs through means of hiring, salaries, disqualification, and mobility and rotation.

Degradation obstructs the capacities and potentials of the workers. Their autonomy is curtailed as their bodies – and practices – are dominated. SWs lose the opportunity to think about solutions to the multiple manifestations of the social issue outside of what the State-employer proposes, accepting the conditions as given, a product of the need to sell labor power and the fear of unemployment.

In the last section (“Final (and Open) Conclusions”), the author recaps everything seen, from empirical evidence to theoretical development. It emphasizes how SWs see their possibility of projection towards new alternatives for the realization of social policies mutilated by precarizing their autonomy. The struggle to improve working conditions also allows for a reconsideration of professional practices and opens a new horizon for the governmental organization of social actions.

⁴The extensive volume of data and statistics presented is interesting, as well as the possibility of accessing these and many others through a QR link provided in the text's final pages.



In conclusion, Cademartori's book is a significant contribution to Social Theory for two main reasons:

I) Its in-depth field study with SWs in the province of Buenos Aires, framed in a critical perspective, with clear theoretical concepts for qualitative analysis, results in a crucial tool for the debate on the situations of Social Work professionals. It demonstrates the systematic nature of job precariousness and dispels myths of counter-reform recomposition, emphasizing the role of the State employer as a perpetuator of the degrading conditions of SWs.

II) At the same time, it is an essential document to rethink the relationship between the State and its wage earners. It allows us to move away from the climate of *realpolitik* in contemporary political theory, to think about how various counter-reform processes cast doubt on the State as a guarantor of rights. It opens the door to reconsider the possibilities of a radical change that can subvert situations of precariousness and propose other possible worlds to think about the social issue.

